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CHAPTER XXVIII

NGAPI

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THERE are few articles of food which meet with more energetic denunciation than the favourite Burman condiment, ngapi, which means literally pressed fish. The frogs of France, the rats and puppy dogs of China, the diseased liver of the Strasburg *pâtés*, the "ripe" cheeses of most European countries, and the peculiar character of game in England, with its occasional garniture of "rice," all meet with condemnation from those who dislike such dainties. The smell of ngapi is certainly not charming to an uneducated nose, but the Backsteiner or Limburger cheese of Southern Germany is equally ill-calculated to evoke approbation on a first experience. An old herring barrel smells strong, but there is nothing in nature that more than ngapi hath an ancient and a fish-like smell. Travellers on the steamers of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company are wont to rail in no measured terms at the fish-paste which forms an invariable and obtrusively evident part of the cargo, yet no Burman would think a dinner complete without his modicum of ngapi, and it is a noteworthy fact that one form of the condiment is of frequent appearance on English dinner-tables in the East, under the name of balachong, a term borrowed from the Straits Settlements, but which designates nothing more nor less than a specially prepared variety of ngapi. In the same way there are equally various opinions with regard to the celebrated Durian, a fruit found as abundantly in the Tenasserim province as in the islands of the East Indian Archipelago, and equally highly prized by Burmans. Some Englishmen will tell you that the flavour

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and the odour of the fruit may be realised by eating a "garlic custard" over a London sewer; others will be no less positive in their perception of blendings of sherry, noyau, delicious custards, and the nectar of the gods, while a somewhat objectionable smell is regarded as doing no more than suggest, or recall, a delightful sensation. I am not aware that any Englishman has been equally enthusiastic with regard to balachong, but there is no doubt that ngapi scinsa ["raw-eaten fish-paste," so called because it is fit for consumption without being cooked] is identical with this much-used substitute for anchovy sauce, and is often brought direct from the Burman bazaar by Madras butlers, who declare it has come all the way from Penang, and charge correspondingly.

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Of ngapi there are three main kinds — ngapi gaung, taung-tha ngapi, and ngapi scinsa. Each of these has its special varieties, getting their names from the township where they are prepared, or from the species of fish used in their manufacture.

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Ngapi gaung, or whole ngapi, is the most prized and the highest in price. That made at the village of Payagyí, in the Angyi circle, not far from Rangoon, is celebrated from the rocky promontory of Modain, with its golden pagoda, to the barren solitudes of Mogaung, the Burmese Siberia. It may be made from any kind of fish, but the varieties preferred are the nga-ku, an amphibious, slimy fish, found in ponds and ditches wherever there is plenty of mud, and something under a foot and a half in length; and the nga-gyi, a fish very similar in general appearance and size, but called by the English the scorpion-fish, and very much dreaded for the wounds it causes with the pectoral spines. The great object in the preparation is to keep the fish quite whole, not so easy a matter as would at first appear. The process is as follows: A great mass of the fish, some of them only half dead, are thrown together into a big wooden mortar, and a man stands over them and works about with a curious cleaner made of a bamboo, the end of which has been slit and frayed into a kind of stiff brush. By this means it is surprising how soon the fish are scaled, and how effectively it is done. The larger specimens are, however,

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